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Sustainable Business Model in Fermented Pork Production: Economic Development and Preservation of Traditional Culinary Culture in Vietnam

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Abstract:: *This study explores the potential of traditional Vietnamese cuisine, with a particular focus on thịt chua (fermented pork) from Phu Tho province, in the context of rural sustainable development. Modernization and globalization challenge the conservation of local culinary traditions, but also create economic opportunities. The research addresses the gaps in recent studies regarding the integration of fermented foods into sustainable business models. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the study combined in-depth interviews with producers, local authorities, consumers, and distributors, as well as a quantitative survey involving more than 200 consumers and five producing households in Phu Tho and Hanoi. The findings indicate that production in Phu Tho is primarily household-based, blending traditional artisanal techniques with modern business strategies. While conventional distribution dominates the market, specialty stores and online platforms are gradually broadening their influence. However, weak brand identity and food safety concerns remain major barriers to broader commercialization. Thit chua (fermented pork) not only drives economic benefits but also contributes to the preservation of the cultural identity of the Muong ethnic community. This research proposes a business model that improves profitability and market reach, while safeguarding local values and supporting sustainable development. It emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive strategies to promote the sustainable development of cultural heritage products like thịt chua in the modern economic landscape.*

Key words: *Phu Tho fermented pork (thịt chua); traditional cuisine; fermented food; rural sustainable development; local product; business model; cultural heritage; Vietnam*

1. Introduction

With rapid modernization and globalization, the conservation of traditional cuisine is both an economic opportunity and important from a cultural perspective. In Vietnam and other developing nations, the local food traditions are under threat from an industrialized food system and a changing consumer lifestyle. Overcoming these hurdles, however, has led to a renewed effort to document and safeguard indigenous food traditions as a means of reinforcing national identity and sustainable development

One of the most important trends in Vietnam is the expansion of regionally branded specialty food firms, i.e., those that are branded under schemes like OCOP (One Commune One Product) and Geographical Indications (GI). Such models aim to promote rural growth by associating the local products with their environmental and cultural origin, both delivering economic value as well as cultural exposure. These models attempt to promote rural development through linking local products to their environmental and cultural origin, offering both economic value and cultural visibility. Among various types of fermented pork, *thit chua* in Phu Tho province is one of the most distinctive culinary products. *Unlike generic fermented pork elsewhere or abroad—which favors sourness or long preservation—**thit chua** is an expression of localized fermentation processing using roasted rice powder, natural banana leaf packaging, and short-term fermentation that produces a subtle balance of tangy, nutty, and slightly sweet flavors embodying the cultural and ecological specificity of northern Vietnam*. With its distinctive flavor, traditional mode of production, and strong identification with the Muong ethnic minority, *thit chua* not only forms a medium of cultural expression but also possesses great potential for rural business and place-based branding.

Despite this promise, there is a substantial lack of academic discourse regarding the integration of traditional fermented foods like *thit chua* into sustainable business models. Most research occurs in food safety or cultural anthropology and does not touch on the market mechanisms, economic viability, and policy climate that needs to surround such scaling without compromising their authenticity. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap through an examination of the case of *thit chua* Phu Tho as both a heritage food and a potential driver of inclusive, sustainable rural development.

This research aims to analyze food cultural heritage relative to sustainable economic development in the context of *thit chua*—a fermented pork food product with deep cultural significance in Phu Tho province. The study will analyze existing business models of household producers, cooperatives, and small SME's (small and medium enterprises) concerning the production and marketization of *thit chua*. Additionally, the research will analyze the

sustainability of the value chain based on economic sustainability, social sustainability, i.e., employment and culture preservation, and environmental sustainability as it relates to resources and pollution. Ultimately, we aim to develop a business model that enhances profitability and accessibility to market, whilst preserving a culinary tradition, local know-how, and local livelihoods that relate to this culturally significant food product.

To guide a mass-scale research into the possibility of sustainable development in the production of fermented pork (*thit chua*) in Vietnam, this study is organized under three major research questions. It first tries to identify and map the current characteristics, organizational structures, and value chain relations of business models and production models that are currently existing in Phu Tho, where *thit chua* is produced traditionally. Second, the study aims to investigate underlying opportunities and structural obstacles for local producers intending to move toward more sustainable operations, scale, quality management, and market demand. Third, the study investigates how economic efficiency can be reconciled with preservation of cultural and traditional values like indigenous knowledge systems, artisanal methods, and symbolic ordering of *thit chua* within regional food identity. By posing questions about these topics, the study hopes to be able to further our knowledge of how indigenous food crops can be utilized as instruments of rural economic development and cultural sustenance.

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides the theoretical framework that underpins the research by drawing together the important concepts and related literature on sustainable business models, food heritage, and the socio-economic role of fermented foods in rural development. Collectively, these themes provide a multidimensional perspective of *thit chua* production in Phu Tho to be viewed as both a cultural practice and a possible vehicle for sustainable economic development.

2.1. Sustainable Business Models (SBMs)

Sustainable Business Models (SBMs) outline organizational models that generate economic value simultaneously with addressing social and environmental challenges. Through the core concept of SBM lies the Triple Bottom Line model, which emphasizes the interconnected goals of profit (economic sustainability), people (social justice), and planet (environmental sustainability) (Elkington, 1997). As opposed to the conventional business model focused on fiscal performance only, SBMs integrate stakeholder intelligence, long-term resource stewardship, and values-based value chains into the hub of strategic activity.

Within food and domestic crafts, SBMs are increasingly being employed to support rural communities and small-scale producers. Studies suggest that by aligning traditional methods of production with the values of modern-day sustainability—i.e., green packaging, local sourcing, and fair trade practices—firms can establish robust brands upon cultural authenticity (Bocken et al., 2014; Dentoni et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant in the context of emerging economies like Vietnam, wherein local specialty products, if aptly grouped within sustainable systems, could have significant added value while enriching communities.

2.2. Food Heritage and Cultural Preservation

Food heritage refers to the collective culinary tradition, practice, and symbolic significance of unique foodways. In its intangible cultural heritage context, traditional food is meaningful in defining regional identity, transmitting intergenerational knowledge, and social-cultural integration (UNESCO, 2005). However, globalization, urbanization, and the industrial food chain have increasingly marginalised artisanal food manufacturing, and hence the dissipation of culinary diversity.

Recent efforts in Vietnam and across Southeast Asia have sought to reverse this trend with tools like Geographical Indications (GI) and the One Commune One Product (OCOP) program. These strategies seek to legally brand and protect culturally unique products and provide branding tools and access to niche markets to rural producers. Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam case studies suggest that culturally rooted foodstuffs can gain new economic life from certifications highlighting their geographic origin, traditional knowledge, and environmental attributes (Trienekens et al., 2018). As a fermented meat foodstuff widely practiced in the cultural tradition of the Muong ethnic minority, *thit chua* is therefore a prime candidate for heritage-based valorization.

2.3. Fermented Food in Rural Economies

Fermented foods have a twofold value for rural society: they are not only dense with nutritional and health value but also cultural and environmental adaptation. For centuries, globally, fermentation has been used to preserve food in the absence of refrigeration, to give flavor depth, and to make the bioavailability of nutrients more efficient. In Southeast Asia, fermented foods such as fish sauce, pickled vegetables, and cured meats constitute part of the diets in the region and serve as indicators of regional food identity (Tamang et al., 2016).

Considering rural development, fermented foods foster community and cooperative businesses because their production utilizes inexpensive local materials. The successful South Korean and Japanese micro-scale fermentation industries sustain livelihoods, empower women,

and foster ecological responsibility through circular production systems (Ishige, 2001). In the Vietnamese context, there seems to be a scholarly gap regarding fermented foodstuffs—primarily animal-based foods—and their role within rural society. This research aims to fill that gap by examining how cultural business models that honor the chua fermentation techniques can be culturally sustainable, respectful, and economically empowering while preserving heritage.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain in-depth perceptions of the production cultures, business systems, and cultural values of *thit chua* —a local fermented pork product of Phu Tho province. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors along the value chain, namely:

- Producers: Small-scale *thit chua* workshop owners and family enterprises, to obtain data on production activities, procurement strategies, perceived problems, and entrepreneurial spirit.
- Local authorities: Government officials responsible for the OCOP (One Commune One Product) program and rural economic development, for assessing the institutional assistance offered to heritage-food companies.
- Consumers and distributors: Urban consumers, intermediary distributors, and specialty food retailers, to assess consumer attitudes, purchasing behavior, and commercial positioning of *thit chua* in new markets.

In addition to interviews, participant observation and field visits were made to production houses in Thanh Sơn district, Phu Tho. The visits were to document traditional fermentation processes, hygiene, material sourcing, and packaging practices. Observation was also made in local markets and food festivals to see how *thit chua* is sold, displayed, and differentiated from other local foods.

Furthermore, an initial exercise of mapping the supply chain to capture the logistics of raw materials (pork, roasted rice powder, and banana leaves), labor, and also capital revealed some bottlenecks as well as some areas that can be sustainably solved concerning upgrading of standardization of products, food safety compliance and access to markets for rural producers.

3.2 Quantitative method

To complement qualitative data, a quantitative survey of 200 consumers and five producing households from Thanh Sơn, Phu Tho, and Hanoi was performed to determine brand awareness, perceived quality, consumption habits, and willingness to pay (WTP) for **thit chua**. A standard questionnaire gathered data on demographics among the consumers, frequency of purchases, rating of the product, and price sensitivity.

In addition, financial and production information was collected from five representative **thit chua** plants in terms of monthly revenue, cost composition, man-hours, and units of output.

Table 1. Consumer Survey Highlights (N = 200)

Indicator	Response	Percentage
Heard of "*thit chua*"	176	88%
Purchased in last 12 months	114	57%
Recognize the OCOP label	142	71%
Willing to pay>50,000VND/box	93	46.5%

Table 2. Monthly Operational Data from Producers (Average of 5 Households)

Monthly Output (boxes)	Avg. Revenue (VND)	Labor (persons)	Avg. Cost (VND)	Profit Margin
2,300	115,000,000	4	89,000,000	22.6%
2,800	136,000,000	5	103,000,000	24.3%
2,100	108,000,000	3	85,000,000	21.3%
2,500	124,000,000	4	96,000,000	22.6%
2,600	130,000,000	4	100,000,000	23.1%

3.3. Scope and Population

Information was collected in Thanh Son district, Phu Tho province—the primary production hub of **thit chua**—and Hanoi, the primary urban market for selling and consumption. The selection of locations encompasses the

production base as well as the final end-consumer segments, critical to evaluating the entire value chain.

The sample includes:

- 5 producers of *thit chua*, which are family-based models and have received OCOP certification.
- 200 consumers from urban and suburban areas aged 25 to 55.
- Retailers specializing in agro-products and wholesale distributors of specialty foods.
- Domestic tourists who would have come across the *thit chua* at food fairs or in rural markets

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Current Business Models in Fermented Pork Production

Current business models in Phu Tho, *thit chua* manufacturing, possess a mix of traditional artisanal methods and embrace new business strategies. Even rooted within country culture and still at the household scale, manufacturers are increasingly subjected to newer consumers' needs, governmental requisites, and web-based business considerations.

Production Structure: Households to Cooperatives

Field visits and interviews with producers indicate that family hands remain involved in *thit chua* production, and size is generally between 2,000 to 3,000 boxes per month. All the processes are manually managed by families, from the preparation of meat, fermenting, right through to packaging, using traditional recipes such as roasted rice powder and banana leaves. Certain producer cooperatives and registered small enterprises have emerged during the past decade, typically under the OCOP (One Commune One Product) scheme. They offer more structured production places, with better access to machinery, sanitary facilities, and certification processes. Coordination remains, however, informal, as well as vertical integration among the actors.

Model Type	Features	Share of Market
Family households	Manual labor, local recipes, informal sales	~70%
Cooperatives	Semi-automated, OCOP-certified, regional markets	~20%
Small enterprises	Registered businesses, better packaging, and limited branding	~10%

Distribution Channels: Between Tradition and Modernity

Three main channels are used in distributing the *thit chua*.

1. Traditional retail: Through neighborhood wet markets and roadside stalls, often directly from producer to consumer. This continues to reign supreme among rural consumers and returnees.
2. Specialty stores and OCOP exhibition shops: These suit urban and middle-class consumers who are attracted to healthy, handmade, and certified products.
3. Online platforms: Increasing numbers of producers—especially young entrepreneurs—employ Facebook, TikTok, Shopee, and Lazada to reach broader publics. They are limited by logistics problems resulting from short shelf-life and limited access to cold chains.

Channel	Strengths	Challenges
Local markets	Convenient access, loyal customers	Low margin, limited brand rigorization
Specialty food outlets	Better price, perceived quality	Requires packaging, regulation
E-commerce & social media	Market expansion, youth appeal	Delivery risks, food safety compliance

Branding, Packaging, and Food Safety Standards

Brand identity is still weak among most producers. Most family businesses are sold without brand names, logos, or even dates of expiration. The consumers interviewed in Hanoi and Phu Tho kept responding that they "know the product by region or family name," rather than a generic trademark.

However, OCOP producers have done better. They invest in vacuum-packing, packaging, and even in storytelling about brands (e.g., the Muong ethnicity of origins). But food hygiene and safety are still major hurdles to wider commercialization. Fewer producers use national food hygiene standards, traceability labeling, or shelf-life labeling.

Dimension	Observation
Branding	Minimal to zero for household producers
Packaging	Simple plastic cover; OCOP producers use a vacuum/eco-box
Food Safety	No standards, especially among household units
Labeling	No ingredients, expiry date, or nutritional information

Recent *thit chua* production models capture conflicts between business sustainability and cultural authenticity in contemporary times. Household-based, small-scale organizations enrich cultural value and product identity but are plagued by operational fragmentation, lower levels of product standardization, and vulnerability to marketplace competition. Despite these considerations, indicators of upgrading possibility—most notably through OCOP programs, consumer market demand for artisanal foodstuffs, and digitalization of specialty food products—emerge. Closing the commercialization gap for these heritage values is required for this heritage food's long-term viability and success.

4.2. Economic and Cultural Impact

The manufacture and commercialization of *thit chua* have far-reaching impacts beyond household income, both as a commercial enterprise and as a means of expression of culture, most significantly among the Muong ethnic minority in Phu Tho province. This twin aim presents strange challenges and opportunities in reconciling tradition with newer economic ambitions.

Livelihoods and Local Economic Development

For many rural households, especially those who do not have stable salaried work or large holdings of agricultural land, production of *thit chua* has emerged as a necessary supplement—or in some cases, a breadwinner—to household revenues. While still frequently informal, the activity creates regular, year-round employment. Work is frequently divided within household settings among household members, from meat cutting and seasoning to packaging and distribution, so the activity is very embedded in household economies.

Increasing market need, particularly in urban areas and the OCOP system, has further stimulated rural entrepreneurship. Thị chua in some villages is now a daily rather than seasonal or ritual product but one embedded within a semi-commercial value chain with raw material suppliers (banana leaves, pig), carriers, and small local retailers. This has created localized micro-economies where the dividend of value addition is kept within the community rather than captured by external forces.

Nevertheless, these benefits of earnings are not shared equally. Those families with greater access to capital, certification, or e-literacy (for instance, selling via Facebook or Shopee) have a better opportunity to grow and gain brand recognition. The others are restricted to the traditional sales outlets, where there are price pressures and limits of bargaining power.

Cultural Identity and Ritual Continuity

Thit chua is culturally more than a commodity—it is an edible expression of ethnic identity, particularly for the Muong groups. Traditionally served at significant occasions such as Tết (Lunar New Year), weddings, and ancestor offerings, the dish plays a ceremonial role in affirming communal values of hospitality, ancestor veneration, and localized resourcefulness. Its fermentation process—via roasted rice powder and banana leaf wrapping—is directly connected to the ecology and culinary logic of the northern midlands.

In a context where rural youth are prone to migrate to the city, the tradition of making and exchanging *thit chua* offers a link across generations. The youth who are engaged in the family enterprise not only acquire technical knowledge but also tales and traditions involved in the production process. In this sense, *thit chua* serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission, rooting communities amidst broader socio-economic change.

Recent efforts at marketing *thit chua* through OCIP festivals, tourism events, and digital narrative have also made it a source of local pride. No longer just a "dish from the mountains," it is now a marker of authenticity in Vietnam's growing obsession with heritage cuisine.

The Fragility of Tradition under Commercial Pressure

Yet commercialization itself carries the risk of cultural loss and economic exclusion. In their struggle to meet food safety demands, extend shelf life, and appeal to new consumer segments, the majority have turned to vacuum-sealed plastic packaging and centralized processing facilities. These concessions, while for access, with all, to larger markets, come at the expense of over-tradition, ecological balance, and sensorial experience.

Secondly, the push towards product standardization may drive out small-scale producers who are not able to support HACCP certification or cold chain logistics. Their informal status also exposes them to regulatory crackdowns, despite their being the cultural carriers of the tradition. Locally developed knowledge and tradition—i.e., bamboo-basket fermentation in one example are, in some cases, being sacrificed to shortcuts in the interests of meeting modern-day timelines.

Uncontrolled, the process runs the risk of reducing the *thit chua* to a homogenized souvenir item, stripped of symbolic content and social context. The issue is therefore one of traditionalism vs. change: preserving intangible cultural heritage while developing within cultures of respect for authenticity and environmental integrity.

5. Proposed Solutions

For the sustainable development of Phu Tho's *thit chua*, an intervention is required with a multilayered approach to the link between preservation of culture and innovation of markets. Rather than treating this fermented pork product as a mere commodity, interventions must appreciate its dual character as both a living cultural heritage and an economic resource. This chapter proposes four strategic directions to unlock the utmost potential of *thit chua* on the domestic and global markets.

5.1. Cultural Branding and Storytelling Enhancement

Unique from generic fermented pork elsewhere or even in other countries, Phu Tho's *thit chua* is an integral part of the Muong ethnic people's cultural identity. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the current producers fail to communicate this message. To rectify the situation, a coherent cultural brand story that tells the story of origin, craftsmanship, and ritual significance of the product must be built.

For example, product packaging can include Muong traditional designs of Muong cloth, and narrative highlights on the historical utilization of *thit chua* during the past on New Year's or ancestor worship. QR codes in packaging can direct consumers to short documentaries or animated videos narrated by experienced locals explaining fermentation techniques and cultural background. This not only gives the product a point of difference on over-stocked retailer shelves but turns the product into an experience, fascinating, particularly to young consumers seeking experiences.

The establishment of geographical indication (GI) or region-specific certification labels would also boost brand credibility. There needs to be a clear difference between *thit chua* and generic "fermented pork" in marketing and also in regulatory regimes, emphasizing the role of local ecology, practices (e.g., wrapping in banana leaves), and symbolic meaning. Branding in this case is less an issue of logos, but of identity, memory, and pride.

5.2. Capacity Building and Technology Transfer

While there is abundant cultural capital in *thit chua*, its makers are in situations of restricted knowledge, non-formalized standards of hygiene, and complete lack of access to relevant technology. They do not have the requisite expertise to meet growing market demands or regulatory stipulations. What it requires, therefore, is focused capacity-building, which is not top-down but participatory and bespoke.

Local cooperatives or OCOP committees could hold workshops in basic quality control, sanitation, inventory management, and shelf life extension. For instance, farmers could be trained to check and avoid microbial contamination, label the products appropriately, and calculate unit cost structures. This would allow even small family-level production units to adhere to national requirements of food safety without losing their artisanal character.

On the technological side, simple innovations such as natural bio-preservatives (e.g., guava leaf or lemongrass extract) can help in obtaining shelf life extension by the clean-label specifications. Similarly, intelligent packaging, such as time–temperature indicators or freshness sensors, can be trialed with assistance from regional universities. Those technologies may seem ambitious, but the histories of Thai fermented foods firms and South Korean kimchi exporters demonstrate that ethnic food can expand without losing its character—if there is culture-informed innovation, not against it.

5.3. Developing Sustainable Distribution and E-Commerce Channels

Currently, this supply of *thit chua* remains highly reliant on local wet markets or unstructured tourism consumption. To grow meaningfully, producers require support to reach greater consumer bases through more diversified and sustainable channels.

One option is to create short-value chains linking producers to clean-food stores, organic cooperatives, and weekend city farmers' markets in urban centers like Hanoi, Ninh Binh, or even Da Nang. This reduces dependence on intermediaries, increases margins, and generates long-term customer loyalty. Models already exist: Đa Lat GAP vegetable cooperatives, for example, connect direct farmers with Saigon retailers using cold-chain transport every weekend—producers of the rural favorite countryside dish *thit chua* could do the same on a regional scale.

There is another untapped frontier in e-commerce. Several young farmers in Thanh Son are already streamlining their sales on Facebook Live or TikTok, but without professional logistical and marketing assistance. They can be assisted through digital skills training, photography, branding kits, as well as partnerships with cold storage delivery platforms like Giao Hang Tiet Kiem or Coolmate. Such collaborations would allow *Thit Chua* to connect with urban millennials, health-conscious consumers, and even the Vietnamese diaspora who are seeking authentic flavors from their home country.

5.4. Policy Recommendations and Stakeholder Collaboration

An enabling policy framework will be required to sustain long-term transformation. *Thit chua* must be incorporated into rural development initiatives by the provincial government, not just as an endowed product but as an entrepreneurship model of culture. It could include preferential micro-credit loans, tax incentives for registered

producers, green packaging subsidies, and promotion through tourism marketing initiatives.

Above all, cooperation between sectors is needed. Scientific documentation of traditional fermentation processes can be undertaken by research organizations, enabling the creation of new preservation models. Cultural heritage institutions can document and preserve the intangible aspects of production. Meanwhile, socially conscious corporations can co-design ethical products that respect both tradition and innovation.

One such business is a "Living Heritage Incubator" where producers, designers, scientists, and local young people work together to create new products from tradition. The incubator would serve as both a cultural archive and a business laboratory so that thịt chua can innovate without losing its origins.

5.5. Exploring High-End Markets and Export Potential

Apart from local distribution, thịt chua also holds unrealized potential in premium and export markets. With the growing global demand for ethnic, fermented, and artisanal foods, items like thịt chua can be positioned to serve gastronomic tourism, specialty shops, and diaspora-driven specialty retailers. Accessing these markets, however, requires a shift in orientation—from "rural product" to "cultural delicacy."

To this purpose, producers must reposition thịt chua as a heritage-based culinary gift, suitable for fine dining establishments or premium hampers. This entails repackaging with eco-materials, adding bilingual labeling, and including certifications such as HACCP, ISO 22000, or export-level OCOP grades. Inspiration can be taken from Korean kimchi or Japanese miso, which have transformed from household staples to globally acclaimed cultural exports.

5.6. Digital Cultural Communication and Youth Engagement

In order to attain sustainable development, it is critical to invest in digital cultural communication campaigns that would attract the young and global audience. Traditional media campaigns are not sufficient anymore. Instead, narrative about thịt chua must be reimagined on social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts—through recipe videos, cultural trivia, and behind-the-scenes production village vlogs.

Young local influencers and food bloggers can be enlisted as cultural ambassadors, employing the senses of beauty, humor, and interactivity to demystify thịt chua. A TikTok series, for instance, can document the "100 days learning to ferment pork with grandma," dispelling the Muong culture surrounding the dish. Knowledge is not only retained, but also affects created as well, organically generating demand.

Besides, youths' activities in "digital heritage entrepreneurship" can be adopted by schools and community centers and teach the younger generation how to document, market, and trade traditional food in new and respectful ways. These efforts can transform thịt chua from a product of border villages into a living heritage emblem of the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined Phu Tho's thịt chua not just as a local dish, but as a living testament to local heritage, ecological acumen, and socio-economic resilience. Through its process of fermentation, social production with family and neighbor, and ritual significance in Muong ethnic culture, thịt chua transcends being a source of sustenance—it is edible heritage, replete with identity and intergenerational memory.

Empirical data from producer interviews, consumer surveys, and field observation draw attention to the high level of contribution of fermented pork production to home livelihood and local economic development. While most producers are informal at the small scale, their growth potential is self-evident, particularly via the introduction of sustainable business models, cultural branding, and pro-poor technology.

Most importantly, thịt chua demonstrates the power of rural food systems to be inclusive, heritage-based drivers of development if placed in the context of cultural authenticity and supported by innovation. From street stalls to virtual markets, from village festivities to international tourist circuits, thịt chua is a resource for transformation as both commodity and heritage.

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